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ABSTRACT

Although the Indian education system is probably the largest in the world, little is really known about what goes on in Indian educational institutions. The information that does exist can be grouped into four types: prescriptive, general description, widely statistical (based on government statistics), and specifically statistical (based on surveys). None of these approaches have been used effectively in developing a realistic picture of India's schools. What is needed is an anthropological approach, a methodology based either on the classic field work model or the use of ethnomethodology, which intersects with linguistics. The remainder of this paper presents an example of anthropological education research. It reports the results of field work, conducted at the village of Lilauli in the 1960s, on the relationship of the local school to the community. It describes: (1) the lack of school inspection; (2) the reliance of district authorities on the local school teacher for enrollment and attendance statistics; (3) the organizational goals of Lilauli for its school; and (4) the role of the school within the traditional village socialization process. (KH)

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BUT BASED ON WHAT? VILLAGE PRIMARY EDUCATION AND URBAN EDUCATIONISTS IN INDIA

by

R.S. Newman

La Trobe University

Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Comparative International Education Society (10th, Sydney, NSW, Australia, November 24-26, 1982).

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BUT BASED ON WHAT?

Village Primary Education and Urban Educationists in India

R.S. Newman,
La Trobe University,

"... he felt the presence of God, His Providence and His mercy. He could virtually see the Almighty seated on His throne of glory, the earth serving Him as a footstool. Satan was vanquished; the angels sang hymns. The Book of Memory in which were recorded all the deeds of men lay open. From time to time, at sunset, it even seemed to Abba that he saw the river of fire in the nether world. Flames leaped up from the burning coals; a wave of fire rose, flooding the shores. When he listened closely he was sure he heard the muffled cries of sinners and the derisive laughter of the evil host.

No, this village was good enough for Abba Shuster. There was nothing to change. Let everything stand as it had stood for ages, until he lived out his allotted time and was buried in the cemetery among his ancestors ..."

- from a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer.

excerpt from a cross-cultural survey of Incidence of Non-predicted Psychoperceptual Phenomena

Subject No: 27-B-81

Sex: Male

Age bracket: 45-50

Religious affiliation: Jewish

Behavioural setting: small town, rural

Marital status: married

Offspring: 7 sons

Occupational ranking: III (lower level craftsman)

Technical labels for dominant
personality factor: Autia, low ego strength

Popular labels for dominant
personality factor: Imaginative, emotional

Clinical status at time: no stimulant present

Traditional-modern social
environment scale rating: T-1 (strongly traditional)

Perceptual Acuity Test results: (see appendix)

There is no lack of material on schooling and schools as institutions in the Third World. Substantial material also exists on non-formal, traditional, or experimental forms of education in a number of countries. Yet one may doubt the validity or reliability of the findings of many of these studies. Like the two descriptions of the same thing that begin this paper, sociological research in education can make a robot out of a swan, a burst of quantifiable data entries out of a vision of Eternity. I want to deal with two subjects in this short paper. The first is the need for methodology that will concentrate on the observable reality of education at the grassroots level. The second is to show how research or action programs based on unreliable or unrealistic data are not likely to be useful. To illustrate these two points I will use observations taken from my own research on village schools in Lucknow District, Uttar Pradesh, India, and in the general field of Indian education.

I. Right Here in My File Cabinet versus Flies on the Rice

The Indian education system is one of the biggest in the world if not the biggest, taking China's much smaller university system into account as well as the much smaller populations of the USA and the USSR. Yet very little is really known about what goes on in Indian educational institutions. There is plenty of written material but most of it can be grouped into four categories. I argue that none of this literature provides us with a real sense of what is happening in Indian schools or universities, none of these works help planners, administrators, evaluators and other experts make decisions on the basis of a firm understanding of the day to day ethos of Indian schools. The first of the types of material is prescriptive. In these books (there are fewer articles of this sort) writers try to spell out what is needed for India's educational progress. They deal with the possibility of using various foreign or domestic educational theories and whether or not such theories or their derivative systems will be effective or satisfactory for moulding India's future generations. Examples of prescriptive works range from the widely known and referred to Kothari Commission Report to such books as Humayun Kabir's Education in New India, G.N. Kaul's Values and Education in Independent India, T.R. Sharma's Some Major Problems in School Education in India, and K.L. Shrimali's Education in Changing India.

A second kind of material on Indian education is of general description. There is a large amount of this type, which might possibly be said to include general histories of education as well. These books and articles take a wide view of Indian education as a whole or of a particular aspect. They are not based on detailed surveys or on intensive field work. They are not usually marked by theoretical, rigour. Some examples of works on Indian education as a whole are J.P. Naik's Equality, Quality and Quantity: the elusive triangle in Indian education, S.P. Ruhela (ed.) Educational Challenges in Socialist India, Z.K. Setranjiwalla (ed.) Current Trends in Indian Education and T.N. Thomas Indian Educational Reforms in Cultural Perspective. Samples of the general descriptive approach towards particular aspects of Indian education are H. Harap's Improvement of Curriculum in Indian Schools, Verma, Bagley and Mallick's Illusion and Reality in Indian Secondary Education, and such articles as R. Iredale's "Non-Formal Education in India: dilemmas and initiatives" and "Pre-school Education in South India" and P. Kale's "Guru and Professional: The Dilemma of the Secondary School Teacher in Poona".

The third category of literature on Indian education is widely statistical, that is, the work is based on government statistics at a national or state level, not those gathered by the researchers themselves at the local level., D.P. Chaudhri's Education, Innovations and Agricultural Development and K. Venkatasubramanian's Education and Economic Development in India: Tamil Nadu - A Case Study are good examples. A fourth category is specifically statistical; those studies based on surveys. The data has been gathered by questionnaire or inter-

view and the information is inevitably based on indicators which stand for various aspects of the reality observed, not on anything resembling reality itself. Some examples of this category are G.S. Bhatnagar's Education and Social Change, a survey by scheduled interview of some Punjabi rural communities, Y.K. Malik's "Trust, Efficiacy and Attitude Toward Democracy: a case study from India", a survey of high school students and Reddy and Bhat's The Out of School Youth, done in Delhi and two cities in Andhra Pradesh. The prescriptive literature calls for many kinds of reforms, innovations, basic changes, and new philosophies. The statistical data purports to present a profile of Indian education at wider or narrower levels. The descriptive ought to describe, by definition. All the literature ought to be based on the realities of the thousands of schools and universities scattered across the subcontinent. It is not.

There are two other possible methodologies with which educationists might approach the study of education in India. The first is anthropological; the classic field work model. The researcher goes to a single school or a very few schools and makes in-depth observations, not only to do with a select, narrow topic but on the interactions between school and community, students and teachers, teacher and teacher, teachers and parents, and students and their parents. These are the basic relationships out of which education is built. Village perceptions of school and schooling as part of their lives rather than mere marks on a scale of ten are vital if we are to understand India's educational problems. The amazing fact is that despite the vast literature on Indian education there is not a single field study of an Indian village school in print. The present writer has done such a study - it remains unpublished. Ruth and Stanley Freed did an study in the 1950s which was published in 1981 by the American Museum of Natural History. It is titled Enculturation and Education in Shanti Nagar but devotes only a few pages to the village school. There are some drawbacks to such studies, as Mehan (1978: 35) points out. They tend to be anecdotal but more importantly they do not provide the criteria used to include certain experiences and not others. As a result it is difficult to determine the representativeness of the events described. Finally "research reports presented in summary form often do not preserve the materials analysed. Therefore, it is impossible to derive alternative interpretations. (Mehan, 1978: 35). Compared to the drawbacks in other approaches, these are not overwhelming.

The other methodology which has enjoyed some popularity among a certain section of the comparative education field is ethnomethodology. Heyman (1979: 248) says that comparative research should focus its attention on the problem of describing how the social reality called education exists in the lived world. An ethnomethodologist should study what is observable, recordable and reproducible. He should concentrate "on the detailed analysis of social interaction as the most obvious source of social reality of education". This should be at a micro-level. Such research will by necessity intersect with linguistic analysis as a good deal of the foundation of social reality is composed of language. The problem of ethnomethodological research is general (as it is propounded in the literature - see Douglas, 1970; Garfinkel, 1967 and Mehan and Wood, 1975; is that it is ponderous and extremely difficult. Ponderous because the tapes of months of interactions can accumulate into a mountain of material which must then be analysed and difficult because if linguistic detail gets even a slightly more than justified amount of attention, problems of word choice, actual meaning, and bias because of the presence of the observer or tape recorder will obscure the result. I have not been able to locate a single example of ethnomethodological research done in India.

There have been a number of articles and books written about research methodology in education many by comparativists. There are a number of points of view. I tend to agree with Mehan and Wood (1975: 49)

> "To obtain the computer printouts and subsequent tables on which sociological explanations are built, the sociologist must first transform respondents' answers into quantifiable data. Such coding processes conceal the respondent's experience of the social scene that is being asked about".
>
> "Surveys dip into everyday life and take a reading as if people were oil in an engine and the interview a callibrated dipstick. The sociologist presumes that what adheres to the stick is itself not important, except for what it indicates about 'something else'".

Heyman (1979: 242) points out that you cannot use scientific models to study social reality if what you want to do is describe that reality. He argues that too many comparative studies in education do not examine processes that can be observed but settle "for the measurement of indicators for supposed social realities through the study of official statistical data, questionnaire responses, recruitment patterns, interest groups and so on". It is not that measurement research is useless or that prescriptive writing is "preachy" and a waste of time. The argument here is that until we have a decent picture of what the nature of Indian education at the grassroots is, none of the rest can really make sense. What is current research based on? Hence the title of this paper.

Why are there no field work studies in Indian education? One reason is that Western sociologists and educationists prefer to deal with quantifiable data that will fit into computer programs that will yield findings that will satisfy government or Foundation administrators that their money has been well-spent. Numbers, percentages and averages are the stuff of progress reports and the basis of investment in programs. Having been trained in this style of research, Western social scientists concerned with education feel most comfortable with it. You can produce a large number of papers and even books by using measurement studies. You send out questionnaires or graduate students with interview schedules and write up the results. You can maintain a busy schedule of teaching and meetings and still produce research results. Your family life is not disturbed.

Western anthropologists have long been concerned with small-scale societies. Though in recent times this traditional focus of anthropology has broken down, most anthropologists prefer to deal either with more theoretical issues closer to the pulse of "Man and Culture" or in India particularly, with caste, politics, social change, women, and population - some of the preferred topics of our day. Few, if any, have taken an interest in institutions like schools, unions, the police, hospitals, cooperatives, factories or the military. In part this is because access to some institutions is denied or is extremely difficult. But it is also due to the current "fashion" prevailing in the field.

Indian sociologists, educationists, and anthropologists should certainly realise the need to investigate their own social institutions. Of course, they have not been idle. But as I have argued elsewhere, (Newman, 1977, 1981) Indian social scientists have been formed in the Western mould. Both their concerns and their methods are borrowed from the West, particularly the USA. Thus, the vast majority of Indian studies are on Western models and the wealth of statistical material available is matched in no way by a wealth of qualitative material. Indian social scientists have looked largely at indicators rather than at phenomena themselves.

Ultimately it is easier to say "Oh, I have the statistics right here in my file cabinet" than to leave home, office, town and even country and come to dwell amongst peasants and traders whose habits are not always pleasing and whose

understanding of research is less than perfect. It is difficult to replicate accepted field work designs in a village school. It is difficult for a foreigner (who must speak the language) or an urban Indian (who must empathize) to interpret what all his observations mean. But I would argue that in the end there is no substitute for "flies on the rice"; no way out. If we want to know the state of education in vast stretches of India, that varied sub-continent of 685 million souls, then we have to observe it. It is easier to live in cities, but one need not go far away. The village I studied, Lilauli, is only ten miles from the Uttar Pradesh capital building, but it could be another country.

II. The School at Lilauli: some results of field work methodology

I first came to Lilauli, a village in Lucknow District in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I worked there during 1965 and 1966, coming to know many people, but particularly the young men in their early and mid-twenties. At that time there was no paved road, no electricity, no effects of the Green Revolution, not a single university graduate, no consolidation of land holdings (chakbandi), no English spoken, and the primary school had been in operation for only four years. I returned to do my doctoral research for the whole of 1970 and returned twice more, in 1974 and 1982. It was a period of great change in Lilauli and North India in general. Seventeen years after I first laid eyes on the village there was electricity, new crop patterns, tube wells, knowledge of family planning, land holdings were consolidated, two or three boys had graduated from university, many men worked in new factories in the city and prosperity was evident. Village days are still quiet, the fields green and yellow in the winter sun, and the long-promised clean-up of the lanes and by-ways has yet to happen. India has gone through and is still undergoing great turmoil in all spheres of life. The village school has hardly changed at all.

The study I did in 1970 and the topic I have been interested in since then concerns the relationship of the school to the village. (Originally the study covered a Muslim school in a nearby village as well as a private, Catholic run, English language school in the city). I did a field study in the anthropological mode: I sat for weeks in the school, I had long conversations with the teachers, I talked with many of the male villagers and learned, over the months (and years) about their lives, their problems, and their opinions. Eventually I put everything together as best I could, trying to show the intimate and inescapable tie between school and village. Though primary schools, organised at a District or State level, are a modern institution, the school at Lilauli has been absorbed into village culture. I suspect the same to be true in the vast majority of village schools in India. We are talking about a village institution, not an "instrument of modernisation". From this study a number of issues arise which reflect on the first part of the paper. That is, taking into consideration what I learned from doing this field study and knowing that few others, if any, exist, I wonder how accurate the perceptions currently held of Indian education are. I have chosen four areas to discuss here.

(a) The Lucknow Connection

In 1970 there was no inspection of Lilauli's school by anyone. Inspection was due but it did not take place because it required a long bicycle ride, mingling with villagers and eating their food. In any case no one, certainly not the teachers, would complain if the inspector did not arrive. The village school was attached to a "local centre" of twelve schools whose office was an upper primary school in a nearby large village called Baburi. This centre was in turn connected to a "Block Centre" which encompassed all the villages in the development block, about 100. The "Block Centre" was in touch with the District Office in the city. All the people involved at Baburi and the Block were villagers by language, upbringing, attitude and dress. Urban officials stayed in the city. One inspector

came on the day of the 5th grade's examination at Baburi. That was as close as he came to Lilauli. My notes recall the arrival.

> At 10.20, an hour and twenty minutes late, B.P. Trivedi arrives on his bicycle wearing a sun helmet, sunglasses, a terylene shirt and pants, and expensive sandals. The helmet identifies him as an urban official venturing out into the countryside. The other items merely increase his identity as an urban, Westernised man. All the teachers jump up and go to touch his feet. Helmet under his arm, this pudgy young man of 30 or 32 takes a quick look into the examination rooms - says something in English in an impressive manner, and disappears into the end room followed by a small crowd of teachers.
>
> Trevedi and I have a talk. He speaks good English. He is a double M.A. from Lucknow and Agra Universities in History and Political Science. He hopes to go abroad to study. His wife is a school principal. He has written some books on political science.

B.P. Trivedi is the first real city man as one ascends the educational ladder from Lilauli's primary school. No one else speaks English at all. No one dresses or acts like he does. None of their wives even leave the house much less have a professional career. He was greatly concerned to accentuate every difference between the village teachers and himself. It was painfully obvious that he did not care for village problems or village people. He was not acquainted with them. That was his sole visit to the Baburi local circle for the year. Since 1970 the system of administration has been changed to a state basis. Now the ladder stretches even further. The teachers are more secure in their jobs as state employees but there is probably even less inspection because now the fifth grade takes its exam in the village itself without inspection by anyone. Anyway, an inspector's visit is usually formal and stage-managed from start to finish. This is not a particularly Indian phenomenon. I suspect, but cannot prove, that the sub-deputy inspector described above would be the one asked for information by higher officials. After all, no one else came even once.

There is another way of obtaining information however.

(b) <u>The Numbers Game</u>

Urban officials in need of information about village schools in their district can request the relevant statistics from the Block Offices or other repositories. Urban educationists too can glean their information from the appropriate official in one or another office. There is a marked tendency to do this rather than discover the reality the hard way. But how accurate are the available statistics?

In my experience they are very far from accurate. In Lilauli statistics-recording was a duty that reflected the conscientiousness of the teacher rather than anything about what went on in daily life. For example, all children of roughly the same age group were enrolled by the teacher to be first graders. That means their names appeared on the roll and a particular number of enrollees was recorded at the Baburi and Block level offices. Less than half actually ever sat in class. Attendance statistics, it can thus be imagined, were not too reliable. Attendance was taken a few hours after school opened to allow for late arrivals and the paper record for the (hypothetical) inspection bore no resemblance to the number of children who sat in class. Every month the attendance figures were sent to the Block Centre office. Birth dates were another indicator of statistical unreliability. As is well-known, Indian villagers do not write birth certificates. There is no attention given to birthdays and most people do not know their exact

date of birth. The teacher in Lilauli showed me his record books. In 1970, most first graders were born in 1964. Without any written information and because the children could not say, two first graders were inscribed on each even day of the month for February and early March 1964, two on February 2, two on February 4, and so on. The class schedules for all five grades were neatly kept on a peg on one wall. Any visitor was shown them. They bore not a shred of resemblance to what actually went on. The discrepancy was not partial, it was total. Certain subjects were shown as being taught, periods were allotted for them, but they were never mentioned. Otherwise everything proceeded at the whim of the two teachers.

One must realise what all these statistics are based on - the need to keep statistics.

In 1970, and to a great extent today too, an outside observer would view things in this way. Government money is spent on the school but the results are meager. Basic education (with its crafts-based orientation) was a paper ideal. Statistics are manufactured to meet what teachers feel is a "norm". The junior teacher was (and is) absent 75 per cent of the time. The senior teacher reads novels and gossips with passers-by during school hours. Very little information flows from village to city. Contacts between village, the two centres, and city are tenuous. Communication is slow. The senior teacher's complaints about the other's constant absence were justified but completely ignored. The Lilauli school and the two "centre" offices are in a different cultural milieu from the urban directors and planners. Inspectors are urban men, living in the city, who do desk work rather than tour the countryside. The tentativeness of their excursions out of Lucknow is symbolised by Sub-Deputy Inspector Trivedi's sun helmet.

(c) Organisational Goals - Village and City

One important result of field work on schools in any part of rural India must be to identify a certain discrepancy between what the villagers think the school ought to accomplish and what the urban planners think. There are really two different standards, - of how to evaluate effectiveness and of aims or goals themselves.

The Government of India and the State government gather information in order to judge the effectiveness of the organisations set up to bring change to the masses of Indian people. This information is largely quantitative, not qualitative. There is virtually no qualitative feedback. Evaluation of village schools by urban officials is mostly based on "counting material achievements and measuring accomplishments against administratively set goals. (Akeson, 1957: 47). The village, on the other hand, has no set, well-established criteria for evaluation. Villagers' views on education vary as does their degree of awareness as to what goes on in a school. From the urban, official point of view, the school at Lilauli must be considered ineffective. But from the village standpoint, the school has maintained its effectiveness as socio-economic conditions change. The school is still reasonably accepted if only because there is no alternative.

In Lilauli, there are two sets of organisational goals, two definitions of efficiency. The village wants the school to socialise the children to the outside world and free them from the lifelong fears and complexes of illiteracy. It wants some children to be able to climb the educational ladder to white collar jobs in the city. Finally, it does not want the school to be an agent of change, to wean children away from village values and attitudes. The village goals for the school are largely being met. Though there are certainly questions one might ask, about the school's role in socialising children to the outside world for instance, Lilauli people feel it is so. Therefore we may state that to them the school is effective.

The urban goals for the school, those found in five year plans and national education commission reports, are not in evidence. The school is not an agent for change, neither is it a source of agricultural knowledge or new ideas. More on this will be mentioned below. The teachers' salaries are paid but urban goals are not met. One could hypothesize about another village school where government goals for primary education were nearly met. That school would receive the same amount of aid and attention as Lilauli's school. Due to "soft state" (Myrdal, 1968: 66) conditions, the urban and rural sections of the U.P. educational apparatus do not mesh, they merely co-exist. Efficiency and inefficiency are equally rewarded. Though organisational goals are not being met from the state's viewpoint, in this case for over 20 years, nothing is done. There is no feedback in either direction, no sanction or reward for good or bad performance.

(d) To Change India

This last area of the four I have chosen is closely related to the previous one. Urban planners, administrators and scholars have thought out many ways in which village education might be upgraded and village social-economic standards improved. The large volume of prescriptive literature as well as many of the surveys is theoretically aimed at this goal. So much has been written on 'research and experiement in rural education', 'new patterns of education', 'changing facets of education' and 'educational reform'. But in practice, the village schools show little sign of being affected by any new ideas. The Lilauli school is very much part of the traditional village socialisation process. Children learn in school in much the same way they do at home - authoritarian adults discipline children to obey. They are not asked to follow a particular set of fixed rules. Punishment depends on the mood of the authority and that punishment is usually physical. Curiosity is not encouraged. Memorisation of religious procedures and texts at home is mirrored in the rote-learning at school. Insults based on caste are common when scolding children of lower caste groups. The language used most often is village dialect, not standard Hindi. Though the government plans and goals envisage the school as an agent of change, the school fits into Lilauli society unobtrusively precisely because it has adjusted to village patterns so well. The teachers have little difficulty in functioning because they do not try to force the learning process out of its traditional Indian mold.

Urban-devised reforms (no physical punishment, coordination of lesson and plan, regular attendance), innovations (craft-based education, practical agriculture for primary children, use of standard Hindi) and philosophies (encouraged love of learning, curiosity, learning by doing and thinking, gentle treatment of students by teachers, and feelings of equality among all castes and religions) do not reach a village ten miles from the vast capital building in the centre of Lucknow. Is it realistic to expect they might reach schools 300 miles away? Does anyone know?

The need for more anthropological, field work studies of Indian schools is patent. Plans and policy must be based on accurate information. This does not exist. Currently used methodology does not, cannot provide, a reliable picture of conditions in the majority of Indian schools nor of the values, attitudes, role models, and expectations that are being shaped there. Graduates of urban, upper middle class or elite English language schools make the educational decisions in Uttar Pradesh. But they cannot visualise what village education is like. They may not be convinced of the importance of doing so, but even if they are, there is no data available to them. There is nearly no research on any sort of school in India that could be called anthropological or ethnomethodological. There is even less on rural schools alone. Village schools in India are the vast majority, but they are virtually unknown.

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